

What happened to my campground?

by Bill Kent

When this piece was written and published last spring, I was surprised at the number of folks who stopped me in town, or took time to call, to express their agreement. I think the message remains valid, for all public and private facilities on the Kenai Peninsula, and deserves another perusal. Also, I want to thank all those who have called to provide information regarding vandalism or other violations they have witnessed... Remember, without your assistance vandals will continue to practice the behavior which may deny you the complete use of the facilities your tax dollars have paid for.

This is the time of year when the acts of a very few visitors to Kenai Refuge come into sharper focus for me. Perhaps the spring weather makes my aging eyes a little sharper, or maybe it's just because I am outside more... who knows? What becomes more evident as the snow melts is the destruction of, and total disregard for the facilities and resources (public and private) of the entire Kenai Peninsula practiced by a small but active segment of the population. They seem to think the campgrounds, signs, toilets, trails, sheds, mailboxes, fences, and other structures are erected with the intended purpose of being shot, burned, torn apart, stolen, or generally defaced.

Please understand, I was born and raised in Georgia where, as in most of the South, destructive vandalism is a way of life learned at an early age by many. So, this behavior is not unfamiliar to me. Nor is it limited to the South; I have seen similar situations in every part of the country where I have worked and lived. But, those examples pale in comparison to the magnitude of the havoc wreaked throughout Alaska, not only on the Kenai Peninsula. Do I notice the vandalism more because I live here? Of course I do; my family made a decision to make Alaska our home, and it seems a thoughtless few are trying to tear it apart or burn it down, and I don't like it.

As a test, consider any single mile of the Sterling Highway (outside the limits of Soldotna, Cooper Landing, or Sterling) where signs have been punctured or defaced with various caliber bullets, shotgun pellets, or spray paint; or where trash (sometimes entire bags) is strewn along the roadside.

I would like for you to understand the monetary cost of this destruction. Many of our signs are made of wood with routed lettering. If you've done any construction work around the house, you know that lumber and paint are expensive. Our carpenter who makes these signs is paid a fair hourly wage for his skills. The total cost of a three ft by four ft sign is about \$400. Repairing gunshot wooden signs is time consuming and not inexpensive. We also use aluminum signs which, depending on the size and lettering, may cost anywhere from \$10 to \$500, or more. Replacing these signs after they are shot or otherwise vandalized is a serious drain on our budget each year, and many signs cannot be repaired.

Besides the time and tax dollars spent replacing signs, there is a real image problem portrayed to the Kenai Peninsula visitor. And even more important, sign shooting is done with total disregard for public safety. When you shoot along a road, it is only a matter of time before some motorist, bicyclist or pedestrian gets injured or killed.

Occasionally someone thinks burning wooden outhouses and picnic tables is great fun, or takes a picnic table out to the middle of a lake during ice-fishing season. This is why we have been replacing our wooden outhouses and picnic tables with ones made of concrete. Every once in a while there may be a little justice: a couple of years ago someone shot up the inside of one of our new concrete outhouses. I can't imagine that this person had too much fun immediately after pulling the trigger from inside four concrete walls.

"Well," you might say, "Why don't you catch them?" That is a desire of everyone on our staff, no doubt. The biggest barrier to catching someone vandalizing a campground or shooting a sign is being in the right place at the right time. Our best help comes from people who witness something happening and provide information about vehicles or descriptions of the vandals. We cannot be everywhere at once and are grateful when someone concerned about their Refuge provides information, which we can use to bring charges against those who destroy facilities that belong to all of us.

If you would like more information about the vandalism problem or would like to provide us with information about vandalism that you have witnessed, give me a call at Refuge Headquarters (262-7021). You can also phone in anonymous tips to Crime Stoppers in Kenai at 283-8477, or to Wildlife Safeguard at 800-478-3347.

Bill Kent has been the Supervisory Park Ranger at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge since 1991. His wife Lisa is a pre-school teacher, and their daughter Riley attends SOHL. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna, call 262-7021 or see the website at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.